

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #1058/01 0681458
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 091458Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7627
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0691

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001058

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM SY

SUBJECT: TWO YEARS AFTER QAMISHLI RIOTS, WHERE ARE THE KURDS GOING?

REF: (A) DAM 929 (B) DAM 421 (C) 2004 DAMASCUS 006504

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As the March 12 anniversary of the 2004 Kurdish riots in northeastern Syria nears, multiple issues regarding Syria's Kurdish minority remain unresolved. Several hundred thousand Kurds in Syria remain without citizenship resulting in serious socioeconomic consequences; linguistic and cultural rights are still severely curbed; and, as with most of the opposition, political activism has been sharply curtailed by regime authorities. Meanwhile, Kurdish activists continue to develop ideas about a Kurdish role in a future Syrian democracy, taking many cues from their Kurdish brethren in Iraq. Kurdish activists also continue to find cooperation with each other and with other Syrian opposition factions difficult, a conflict which some Arab activists see as being of the Kurds' own making. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Kurdish contacts have spent the last several weeks preparing for the commemoration of the March 2004 riots, which took place throughout Hassekah province, as well as in Aleppo and Damascus, in reaction to Syrian police opening fire on a crowd at a soccer match following clashes between Arab and Kurdish fans. Kurdish groups have organized demonstrations to be held on March 12 in Qamishli, the capital city of Hassekah province, and possibly also Damascus. The SARG has also prepared by strengthening security levels, according to embassy contacts (ref A).

¶3. (C) SARG'S REPRESSION OF KURDISH POPULATION STILL INTENSE, DESPITE PROMISES OF IMPROVEMENTS: The list of discriminatory SARG policies against Kurds remains long, including the lack of citizenship for 350,000 Kurds (according to a recent Refugees International report and the figure commonly used by Kurdish groups), the ban on any publications in and the teaching of the Kurdish language, and severe cultural repression. As noted in ref B, the SARG made multiple promises in 2005 and early 2006 to resolve the Kurdish citizenship issue imminently, but concrete action has yet to been taken. (NOTE: The lack of citizenship effectively prevents international travel, ownership of property, many types of employment, as well as limited access to university-level education. END NOTE.) At the same time, Kurds (both activists and average citizens) continue to be arrested on a variety of charges, ranging from accused membership in the Kongra Gel to possessing Kurdish cultural material. For example, in January, two Kurdish men were arrested and remain detained after being caught selling calendars depicting scenes from Kurdish folklore. Prosecution of Kurdish citizens remains a fixture of Supreme State Security Court charges, mainly on charges of membership in the Kongra Gel (successor organization to the PKK) or

another secret organization seeking to annex part of Syria to another country.

¶4. (C) KURDISH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE REMAINS FRAGMENTED, BUT COOPERATION MAY BE AHEAD: There are currently twelve Kurdish domestic political parties, each with varying levels of organization and membership. While officially illegal, the SARG tolerates the parties' existence (like their Arab counterparts) to varying and sometimes dangerously unpredictable degrees. Two loose coalitions exist, the Kurdish Democratic Front (which is aligned with Iraqi Kurd leader Masoud Barzani) and the Kurdish Democratic Alliance (aligned with Iraqi Kurd leader Jalal Talabani) (ref C). In addition, there are four independent parties: the Azadi Party, the Yekiti Party, the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union, and the recently formed Kurdish Future Movement. While the two coalitions signed the Damascus Declaration, the Azadi, Yekiti, and Future Movement parties held out, complaining of the emphasis on the Arab and Islamic identity of Syria. Compared to the independent parties, the two coalitions, however, are not nearly as popular in the Kurdish community, according to Arab human rights activist Rezan Zeituneh, who characterized the coalition parties as politically inactive, small, and close to the authorities.

¶5. (C) There are signs that the Kurdish parties are trying to move closer together, despite divisions over the Damascus Declaration. According to Azadi Party activist Luqman Ois, the Azadi Party has begun promoting a dialogue among the Kurdish parties, with the goals of forming a unified message and acting upon it; creating a political document discussing democracy, Kurdish and nationality issues, and relations with Arabs; and working to form a unified political "Front" that includes all Kurdish parties. Other post contacts have also taken notice of improved intra-Kurdish relations. According

to prominent opposition figure Riad Seif, divisions among the Kurds existed in the past, but he said they are now "more reasonable" and are working together more closely.

¶6. (C) KURDISH CIVIL SOCIETY ALSO BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE: In addition to the continued existence of 12 outlawed Kurdish political parties, the Kurds are also slowly organizing underground civil society institutions. The Kurdish Human Rights Committee (KHRC) and the Committee to Defend Stateless Kurds are both active in monitoring and publishing statements on the Kurdish human rights situation. The KHRC, together with a German NGO, has also recently launched a European Commission-sponsored day-care center for street children in Qamishli. The Yekiti Party has started developing a women's NGO, focusing on organizing Kurdish women. Kurdish organizations continue to be at the forefront of public protests in Syria, staging a variety of small, organized sit-ins and demonstrations over the last two years. At least one Kurdish organization, the Yekiti Party, claims to actively train its members in nonviolent tactics, using literature written by veteran civil disobedience trainers Gene Sharp and Robert Helvey.

¶7. (C) KURDISH GOALS: TO RESOLVE ISSUES AND ATTAIN RECOGNITION AND AUTONOMY IN FUTURE DEMOCRATIC SYRIA: While Kurds are quick to enunciate clear goals on resolving the issues of citizenship as well as linguistic and cultural freedoms, they also demand, somewhat more circumspectly, the granting of "national" rights. In discussions with a number of Kurdish interlocutors, the definition of "national" rights remains amorphous, focusing more on the need to overcome Arab preconceptions about the Kurdish population of Syria.

"(Syrian) Arabs must recognize that we did not migrate here from elsewhere, but have lived in these lands for a very long time," says Faisl Badr, a human rights lawyer and Yekiti Party board member. (NOTE: The Kurdish claim of a long-term historical presence of all Kurds in Syria is debatable; even some Syrian human rights activists find the Kurdish claim exaggerated. Human rights activist and Damascus Declaration signatory Haithem al-Maleh, for example, told Poloff that many of the stateless Kurds had moved to Syria from Iraq and Turkey early in the 20th century, when borders were more

porous. END NOTE.)

¶8. (C) Representatives of both the Yekiti and Azadi parties usually claim that they have resigned themselves to not achieving separatist autonomy for Kurds in Syria, and thus discuss the Kurdish role as part of a pan-Syrian identity. They have clear ideas about the freedoms that should be granted to Kurds in a democratic system, as well as what historical SARG measures should be undone. Ois told Poloff that any future democratic constitution must acknowledge that the Kurds are the second "nation" in Syria. Kurds do not like being considered as a minority-rights issue in Syria. Because the Damascus Declaration relegated Kurds to this secondary status, rather than addressing their concerns as a "national" rights issue, most Kurdish activists refused to sign it. In a February meeting, Yekiti Party General Secretary Hassan Saleh highlighted Kurdish resentment over

SIPDIS

SARG Arabization efforts aimed over the past fifty years at attenuating any sense of developing Kurdish nationhood in northeastern Syria. He called for a return to the governorate borders used during the French mandate and for a federal system like Iraq's. Saleh went so far as to draw a map, indicating territories across northern Syria which had been subjected to Arabization programs since the 1970s. When asked about the fate of the region's sizable non-Kurdish population in a future democratic Syria, Saleh answered that Arabs who had lived traditionally in the region were welcome to stay, but anyone who had benefited from Arabization programs in the past four decades had to be transferred out, "like they're doing in Kirkuk," where he said Kurds are using financial enticements to persuade relatively recently settled Arabs (brought by Saddam) to leave Kirkuk.

¶9. (C) COOPERATION WITH ARAB CIVIL SOCIETY REMAINS LIMITED:

Much Kurdish action appears to run separately and parallel to Arab civil society activities. While some cooperation does take place among individual activists, coordination between Arab and Kurdish opposition groups appears limited. The failure of Arab human rights activists to join a December 2005 Human Rights Day demonstration left its Kurdish organizers particularly bitter, as they expressed frustration at Arab activists' unwillingness to take risks. Ois noted, "a year ago, we were able to organize a demonstration together-- now no Arabs join us." Zeituneh noted that cooperation started to wane when Kurds starting appearing at jointly organized events three years ago carrying Kurdish language posters and chanting in the Kurdish language

Kermanji, turning the protest into "a Kurdish thing."

¶10. (C) Activist Rezan Zeituneh said that the schism boils down to "Arab fear of the Kurds and Kurdish distrust of the Arabs." The Qamishli riots of 2004 forced the Arab opposition for the first time to pay attention to Kurdish problems and the power that Kurdish forces have, with Zeituneh noting "the Kurds don't need the Arabs and are able to move the street on their own." The conflict is further reinforced by the Arab perception that Kurds are somewhat disingenuous about their ultimate goals, and focused more on independence/autonomy than on developing Syrian democracy. According to Zeituneh, on the Arab side, some branches of the opposition contain "disgusting" Arab nationalists who ignore all ethnic minority concerns, as they focus on strengthening pan-Arab solidarity as a way to counter what they view as the threat from the U.S.

¶11. (C) Arab activists have voiced their frustrations with their Kurdish counterparts, whose commitment to achieving democracy seems consistently overshadowed by Kurdish demands for autonomy, if not outright separation. Arab activists are particularly troubled by Kurds' unwillingness to address the presence of a large Arab population in the Kurdish heartland of Hassekeh Province. Indeed, Syrian Kurds have exacerbated these Arab fears by continuing to discuss their ideal of outright independence, while simultaneously throwing back (justifiable) Arab criticisms of these ideals as hateful and

xenophobic. Key human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni was critical of what he called "Kurdish stubbornness." While the Kurds share many of the same ideas as their fellow Arab activists, "they have to change their language" in order not to alienate their Arab counterparts. Zeituneh criticized the Azadi and Yekiti parties for failing to sign the Damascus Declaration, noting that the Declaration is a work in progress and a forum for debate and discussion of their demands: "they should work for democracy, then worry about their own agenda." Maleh complained to Poloff that it is the Kurds who are unwilling to work together with the Arabs, pointing to the existence of a Syrian Kurdish Committee for Human Rights as an example of Kurdish reluctance to work with Arab counterparts.

¶12. (C) Some Arab opposition figures have recognized the value of bringing the Kurds into the greater opposition fold.

Leading opposition figure Riad Seif noted that he has had good relations with Syrian Kurds since before his imprisonment, and feels that he has gained the trust of the Kurdish groups. Seif also recognizes the political potential of the Kurds: "if the Kurds gather, they could be a big power in the future." They are "more involved in politics than others," and are a true threat to the SARG: "the regime may try but it cannot manage them."

¶13. (C) COMMENT: Kurdish activists have certainly gained the sympathies of their Arab compatriots on human rights issues like citizenship, linguistic and cultural rights. However, by refusing to sign the Damascus Declaration, while simultaneously waxing nostalgic for the ideal of an independent Kurdistan, the Kurds are alienating some of their most likely allies. If the Kurds continue to develop Kurdish-only, parallel civil society structures, the Arab-Kurdish wedge may continue to grow larger. As with many of the other splinterings within the opposition, the Kurdish-Arab divide provides especially fertile ground for the SARG to use in its "divide and conquer" strategy against the opposition, holding ready the bargaining chips of citizenship, language and cultural rights to assuage Kurdish demands and control the most volatile and mobile part of the opposition. END COMMENT.

SECHE